



LUNDI MATIN 2019-02-16

## AN EXPERIENTIAL POLITICS (II) – THE YELLOW VESTS AS A “PEOPLE” THINKING

DOCUMENTATION GILETS JAUNES

... the yellow vests movement is transforming itself on two grounds: a deep awareness of the situation and solidarity as an answer to this situation.

It is not just about reflexivity, that is, the ability to reflect on the condition that we are part of and our role in that condition. What I see is the emergence of a very dense representation that is beginning to organise itself as a social and political philosophy. The starting point is an immense frustration regarding the response of established powers and the institutions that express them. You may remember that the first demonstrations were family events, gangs of friends, neighbors, colleagues. People came with their children in a stroller thinking that they would make the “elites” understand the need to act urgently. It was to show that they were part of the soul of this country, the “people” who would communicate with its leaders. Admittedly, there was anger at having come to the point that forced this event, but there was also the enthusiasm to see oneself as the protagonist on the civic scene and the certainty that they would make ourselves understood.

Now, what do we discover from Saturday to Saturday? That “the country” is not what we thought. This is not only the country of the tensions on the roundabouts and blocked supermarkets. At another level, it is someone else’s country – we do not know who exactly – someone who does not hesitate to line up in front of you riot walls, armored vehicles, weapons, tear gas . To you who have spent a significant part of your monthly income to come to the Champs Elysees and commune with the nation of citizens, as you feel it through what you have been taught at school and let it be presented to you in solemn speeches. And there, on the Champs Elysées, the most symbolic path of the country, you are treated as an enemy of this specific thing that you have come to claim and which nourishes your enthusiasm, your frustration and your hope: the Republic.

The disappointment is immense. You understand quite quickly that this is not a misunderstanding. I have heard it several times – both from the left and the right – from mid-December: “I will not go to Paris to have myself gassed like a criminal. It’s shameful!”, “I come here for the good of my country, for the young; and all I find is the baton.”

This explains the change in the composition of the protesters over time. There are no more children, far fewer women, the retreat of the non-urban back into their original space. The percolation effect of these experiences through online networks and direct

contacts on roundabouts was rapid and profound. Another perception of French society begins to emerge gradually in among the yellow vests.

*What are the characteristics of this new perception? How does it change their own position in the political landscape?*

First, the trust they had in their connection to the national civic community is broken. But their analysis is not that everyone is against them. They see that the majority of the population – that is, other classes other than their own – support them. Therefore, they feel that this bond is broken because it is ‘betrayed’ by the ‘elites’. This term will designate from this stage on all those who have the power to act as intermediaries between the different parts of the French society, because they are powerful or institutional actors, often both. The perception is then that the game is fixed, from the very moment the cards are dealt. Except for some inevitable elements of conspiracy here and there, this leads to the realization that the impasse in which they find themselves is not due to a cyclical coincidence but to a ‘real’ tendency. They express this by saying that “they want to make us nothing at all, they no longer want a middle class; we must be poor and to obey everything”. When asked who they are, the answer is complex: “the financial powers that hold the government in each country; if we replace Macron with another, it will not change anything. The new will be forced to do as the old”.

Let us not forget that for a large part of them, whether they voted for Emmanuel Macron or not, LREM [*La République En Marche!*] represented a hope for change simply by claiming a non-professional politics. Now, they are beginning to think that if it can not make any difference, that power lies elsewhere. They call this obscure dimension the “system”, “globalization”, “finance”, “Europe”, “money” ... according to their affinities and political cultures. But they speak clearly – and in a very precise and skillful manner – of the architecture of the socio-political system which in fact limits any substantial changes. They thus conclude that this dimension, that channels and frames possible changes, outweighs the will of the “people” because it always leads to compromises that perpetuate it.

It is at this point that the connection is made with a specific power to which they did not attach great importance before: who asks the questions? And then: who makes them relevant or important? Here you see the fundamental questioning of the political process as a whole and, secondly, the questioning of the role of the media in this process. In their discussions, they then discover that any kind of question can be asked and must be examined. I give you my most extreme example in a group of yellow vests unknown to each other at the edge of the Étoile Square [Paris]: a man who seems absolutely sane, very eloquent and friendly, explains that it is natural that a species changes its environment and that it is only in this context that we must consider political ecology. In any case, he says, we have already engaged our future for thousands of years. If the earth can no longer welcome us in the future, it will be necessary to prepare to inhabit other planets. The embarrassment is total in the group. Someone illuminated? A provocateur? Someone then asks him spontaneously the question: “What do you do in life? – I work in the treatment of nuclear waste”. Given his words, the man, in addition to having a higher education, is probably an engineer. The group is thus lead to the idea that this is an absolutely “wild” question, but which could finally in some aspects constitute a legitimate political question.

The interaction within the movement cultivates the feeling that the frame of the questioning of politics is neither so certain nor so justified as one believed it to be. This does not mean that the yellow vests are not in their majority convinced pragmatists, who are focused on ordinary life. On the contrary, it means that they are compelled by the process that they themselves have embarked upon to realise that this pragmatism will not succeed if it is already framed by the questions posed by the powers in place, by the intelligent interrogations of “those who know how to do things”. We realize in short that when we know how to do something, it is impossible to return to the position where we do not know how to do it, in order then to interrogate it completely.

It is in this deepening process that the taste for direct democracy – in the form of the RIC [*référendum d’initiative citoyenne*] and constitutional reform – is cultivated as well as the mistrust for the “grand debate” organized by the government. What the upper social strata do not understand about this mistrust is its complexity. It is not a rejection of specific positions of the government and established political actors, more generally. It is the rejection of a process that is known to be convincing, because it is objectively, once the markers of the questioning are posed. The yellow jackets do not doubt for a second the intelligence of the leaders. What they doubt is that this intelligence is put to use as much as is necessary for the benefit of the “people”. Their demand no longer reveals a technical reasoning of problem solving, but rather raises the political principle of identifying problems.

Like any deep political questioning, it puts the questioned before a practical horizon that is completely inverted. What to do with what we understood? Without wishing to offend the fans of violence, both fascist and insurrectional, the yellow vests are mostly not there to practice subversion and even less social war. They are in favor of a permanent, predictable and relatively just order. But they understood that there is not much to expected from the established order either. So we come to the second foundation of their action: solidarity. Since it runs counter to the analyses that we are accustomed to doing, we are not sufficiently aware of the scarcity of the major political phenomenon that we are witnessing. The yellow vests manage to be in solidarity, in disagreement. It is not without emotional intuition that some see the movement as “their family”. Through a neural architecture whose model is of course the internet, they feel that the end of their diversity will sound the death knell of their legitimacy, because they will turn into a political ‘current’ like the others, with its own mechanisms and own truths; convincing but closed, thus subject to the same pressures they consider unhealthy. Entering the corridors and debates of power can not be done

without limiting their horizon. But now they are aware that their contribution to France and to Europe is precisely this alternative possibility of openness.

While it is extremely difficult to find a path that avoids a “return to normal”, it is not impossible to save time by supporting each other to maintain the opening. The “Assembly of Assemblies” in Commercy expresses precisely this affirmation of solidarity. Through its transparent transmission – managed without external media – and its reservation with regard to the possibilities of political representation, it maintains the balance between a broad platform of political demands and a practice that respects the principles that the movement now advocates. We must ask how many political spaces – activists or intellectuals – can take pride in such a balance.

*You insist a lot on the government and the media that you seem to understand as a rather homogeneous space in the world of the yellow vests. To what extent is this true and why does this homogenisation exist?*

In the symbolic universe of the yellow vests there are, of course, considerable distinctions and nuances. This does not prevent convergence towards a rather unified vision of the major influences on society. I am talking about experiential politics. Consider the following situation: you are alone in not getting by, despite your efforts. You are ashamed of not being able to do what you think is the minimum for your children and sometimes for your retired parents as well. You live this as a personal failure, an individual inadequacy. Your image of what it means ‘to be normal’ is built from what ‘passes on TV’, the representations of fiction, the debates, the speeches of the men and women of influence appearing on the news. Then, for a reason that is related to the price of fuel, you start talking to others who are affected by a topic so important to you, so commonplace for ‘normal’ people that you did not assume to be trouble. You exchange ideas on the internet, you meet people, and you discover that it’s been a long time – a very long time – that you’re not alone, in your situation. The whole country is traversed by your difficulties, your uncertainties, your anxieties. So, all of you ask yourselves the question: how is it that you did not know this situation, that your innumerable hours of exposure to the content of politics and the media did not reveal to you this situation, which is a very widespread experience ? “We started talking to each other, we no longer felt ashamed,” say my respondents. Sometimes it feels like a social #MeToo, through which the yellow vests have linked individual experiential pieces so as to form a general socio-political picture.

It follows naturally that the collective contemplation of this image provokes a violent rejection of the politico-media narrative to which they previously adhered. Here, we must understand another fine point. Groups that consider themselves intellectual and in the know, would also feel guilty for not being able to understand the truth, for not looking for other more critical sources of information, and so on. But for the yellow vests, what prevails is trust. It must be repeated, they are not demanding – at least up until now – a collapse of the social order. What they want is to be respected by the leaders. So when these latter do not tell you what you think is the most serious problem facing the country and that rather you are what is at the heart of this problem, then it is they who are trying to abuse you. There can be no more indulgent explanations.

The last stage of the rupture is the confirmation of these conclusions in the representation of the movement by the political powers and by several media. The yellow vests were for the first time aware of the struggles around political communication that occur every day. They were shocked by their own representation in the media and by the fact that both the government and the media they used to watch or listen to refused to portray them as “people” who legitimately protest and peacefully for the benefit of all. This painful realisation amplifies their mistrust and hostility by joining the political and the media in one unreliable symbolic ensemble, to put it diplomatically.

...

The forceful challenge of the yellow vests is the full the political reorganization of post-industrial societies. The fact that they do not express it in this way does not make it less important. One could indeed say the opposite: since this issue emerges as an experience and not as a discourse, it really exists as a reality rather than as an intellectual projection.

The unacknowledged goal of the established political class is naturally to contain this interrogation before it appears legitimate in an enlarged society. It is for this reason, for example, that from the day before yesterday (Saturday, 9 February), a new discursive assault is launched under the term “anti-parliamentarism”. From the moment when the accusation of being far-right and far-left failed to erode support for the movement, a new concept appears to trap all of the yellow vests into a ‘dirty’ category.

The symbolic struggle is strong. There are also some among the media and the political world who are ironical about their misspelled slogans, without understanding the crucial importance of this act: daring to publish its vision even if one is aware that one makes mistakes. To claim the right to exist as a mediocre, simple, normal being apart from any “excellence”.

All of this increases the likelihood that the movement will be contained by a spontaneous and implicit alliance of all the forces that fear significant sociopolitical change. If things go this way, the result will seem perfectly acceptable to the winners but it will probably be a disaster for France and for Europe. The only way that will remain open will be the electoral path where those who outdo each other in fear or in identity claims will reap the benefits of the stalemate. This will be an unfortunate outcome for all, except for the political parties that will escape the revelation of their growing uselessness in the affirmation of a citizenship claiming direct access to power.

taken from autonomies

---

[← PREVIOUS](#) [NEXT →](#)

---

META

- CONTACT
- FORCE-INC/MILLE PLATEAUX
- IMPRESSUM
- DATENSCHUTZERKLÄRUNG

TAXONOMY

- CATEGORIES
- TAGS
- AUTHORS
- ALL INPUT

SOCIAL

- FACEBOOK
- INSTAGRAM
- TWITTER